

Wellness Notes

Taste*

(Part I)

Taste is one of our most robust senses. Although there is some decline in taste as people get older, normal aging does not greatly affect our sense of taste. Sensitivity to taste begins to gradually decrease as people get older, but in some people, not at all. Taste contributes greatly to our ability to enjoy food and beverages. Problems with taste can have a big impact on the lives of older people. When taste is impaired we tend to eat poorly, socialize less, and generally feel worse.

Taste helps us recognize when food is good or bad for us, but even more important, loss of taste can cause a loss of appetite in older people, which can lead to loss of weight, malnutrition, weakened immunity, and even death. Our sense of taste is part of our chemical sensing system or the "chemosenses." Normal taste occurs when tiny molecules released by the food we eat stimulate special cells in the mouth and throat. These special sensory or gustatory cells send messages through nerves to the brain, where specific tastes are identified.

The taste cells are clustered in the taste buds of the mouth, tongue, and throat. Many of the small bumps that can be seen on the tongue contain taste buds. At birth we have about 10,000 taste buds scattered on the back, side, and tip of the tongue. After age 50, we may start to lose taste buds. We can identify five different taste sensations: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami. Umami or "savory" was discovered by a Japanese scientist in the early part of the twentieth century. Umami is the taste of glutamate, a building block of protein found in chicken broth, meat extracts, and some cheeses.

The ability to perceive the flavor of food occurs through a complex process that combines taste with temperature, texture, odor, and sensations from the common chemical sense -- a system of thousands of nerve endings on the moist surfaces of the eyes, nose, mouth, and throat. It is flavor that lets us know whether we are eating an apple or a pear.

Many people are surprised to learn that we recognize flavors largely through our sense of smell. Try holding your nose while eating chocolate. You will be able to distinguish between its sweetness and bitterness, but you can't identify the chocolate flavor. That's because the distinguishing characteristic of chocolate is largely identified by our sense of smell.

Smell and taste are closely linked in the brain. Many people mistakenly believe they have a problem with taste, when they are really experiencing a problem with smell. It is common for people who lose their sense of smell to say that food has lost its taste. This is incorrect; the food has lost its aroma, but taste remains. Loss of taste occurs less frequently than loss of smell in older people.

When an older person has a problem with taste, it is often temporary and minor. True taste disorders are uncommon. When a problem with taste exists, it is usually caused by medications, disease, or injury. Many older people believe that there is nothing they can do about their weakened sense of taste. Depending on the cause of your problem, your doctor may be able to suggest ways to regain your sense of taste or to cope with the loss of taste. In many cases, the loss of taste turns out to be a loss of smell. If you think you have a problem with your sense of taste, see your doctor.